

The al-Nour Party: A Salafi Partner in the Fight Against Terrorism?

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Brief Analysis

Expressions of support for the Sisi government and against terrorism can be seen as ways to bolster the party's support base and avoid government suppression.

Although Egypt's parliamentary elections set for March 21-22 -- the first since the beginning of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's presidency -- have been postponed until a new election law can pass muster with the courts, the leading Salafi political party, al-Nour, continues to position itself as a partner in the Sisi regime's fight on the domestic and regional threats posed by terrorist groups.

Al-Nour's posture is likely connected to the party's larger strategy of maintaining its voter base and its physical security in an effort to propagate its Salafi teachings -- an approach that may bear fruit, particularly in light of the Muslim Brotherhood's disastrous governance record and the regime's possible interest in cultivating alliances and credibility at the grassroots level.

Al-Nour: From Quietism to Political Activism

Established in June 2011, al-Nour is the political party of the Egyptian Salafi group al-Dawa al-Salafiya (Salafi Call; hereafter Dawa) -- which, from its 1982 inception in Alexandria, explicitly disavowed both violence and direct political involvement.

This posture of quietism by the Dawa, much like with its so-called quietist counterparts across the region, was as much ideological as it was practical. Doctrinally, it originated in the Salafi scholarly interests of redirecting Muslims toward the "purification" of religious practice and belief rather than entering into direct political contestation, as the Muslim Brotherhood had done. Indeed, Salafists criticized groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb al-

Tahrir for being essentially theological lightweights that rushed into political mobilization instead of first correcting their understanding of religious practice and beliefs. Later, they extended this argument to include jihadists as well.

On a more practical level, Dawa's quietism was a reaction to increasing government suspicion and periodic crackdowns on its members given the rising tide of jihadist groups and Muslim Brotherhood activism. The researcher Mokhtar Awad notes that prior to January 2011 the group had a "constant fear of a surprise government crackdown" and that the Egyptian authorities were especially vigilant of the Dawa for its ability to spread through the mosque network of its native Alexandria.

Given the Dawa's posture toward politics, and the precarious position of Islamism in the country, the lobbying by members to found a political party in June 2011 was both surprising and momentous. More interesting still, and perhaps confirming the government's prior suspicions of its popularity, was this new party's ability to win more than a quarter of the Egyptian parliamentary seats after Hosni Mubarak's ouster.

Notwithstanding their lack of political experience, and despite heavy debate among organization elders concerning the acceptability of supporting a political party, al-Nour founders proved themselves highly sophisticated in legitimizing their existence from the outset and in gaining wide support. In forming the party identity, its founders traveled the well-trodden path of their Egyptian predecessors, as well as Salafists elsewhere, throughout the twentieth century -- balancing a projected adherence to a methodology, on the one hand, with a distancing from any kind of political instability, especially jihadism, on the other. The latter was likely especially the case given the implication of Salafists in a number of violent events in Egypt early in the Arab Spring.

At the party's founding conference in June 2011, Dawa leaders argued its primary duties were proselytizing and educating. If in a particular situation the creation of a party was seen to facilitate the attainment of these primary goals, then forming a political party would be justified. Furthermore, the founding members justified their activist plan by citing the literal meaning of the Arabic word *siyasa* -- "governance," rather than its more common usage as "politics" -- explaining that it is an Islamic duty to govern and provide services for the people.

Rather than clamor to Islamize the country as the Muslim Brotherhood had done, the al-Nour leadership framed its campaign as representing the welfare of all Egyptians, and Islam as an existing historical part of the country's identity. The leaders also took a seemingly ecumenical approach to building domestic and foreign alliances. As the founder, Emad Abdel Ghaffour, explained, "Any religion that wishes to help us, we accept [its offer of partnership] under two conditions...the first is to help us attain the welfare of the Egyptian community, and [the] second [is] that the methods for attaining these goals be legal, not like those practiced by political powers or through the deceit of the Egyptian people...Egyptians must live in justice and in peace." Although explicitly extending an olive branch to other religions, Abdel Ghaffour strategically used the Islamically loaded term *umma* for the "Egyptian community," suggesting that by acknowledging the Islamic foundations of Egypt, society can progress.

New Postures and Prospects

Although the strength of its Saudi backers has thus far played into al-Nour's survival, one cannot discount the strategic acumen its leaders have displayed in carefully carving out a place for the party as representative of all Egyptian society and a legitimate government partner. For one thing, al-Nour is the only Salafist party to back Sisi's military government; indeed, it was a vigorous and early supporter of Sisi's overthrow of the Mohamed Morsi government.

In the weeks and months leading up to the election, particularly as the Sisi government has clamped down on jihadist activity and the region continues to flare with the actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and its affiliates (most recently the January 28 attacks by ISIS's so-called Sinai Province, formerly known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, and ISIS's mass beheading in February of twenty-one Egyptian Copts in Libya), the al-Nour leadership has

consistently projected itself on its social media pages as a partner in fighting terrorism.

On February 2, party head Younes Makhyoun issued a statement in which he explained that "what is happening in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen makes us unite against terrorism." The group has issued statements condemning the activities of Sinai jihadist groups and ISIS, calling the latter a "terrorist" group with no connection to Islam, and citing especially the burning of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh and the killing of Egyptians in Libya. Also on February 2, al-Nour spokesperson Nader Bakkar stressed that Egypt needed to open a new Sinai battlefield to be "freed from the grasp of terrorism."

In a February 15 interview with the Egyptian channel LTC, Makhyoun mentioned that he proposed to Sisi to build a unified national agenda in combating terrorism, and, according to al-Nour's reporting of this meeting, Makhyoun allegedly intended to hold a follow-up meeting with army generals.

Aside from using these events to create common cause with Sisi's government, Nour officials seized on them as opportunities for broadening their support base, appealing to Sinai residents to work together in the wake of the January 28 attacks there. Moreover, the group has continued to extend its support base even further, claiming that it will feature women and Copts in its electoral list and citing religious rulings in support of this intention. In turn, Nader al-Sirafi, who heads the Coptic party known as Copts 38, recently explained that while the al-Nour Party was committed to its religious creeds, his group maintained a working relationship with it and that, allegedly, collaboration with the group had been blessed by the Coptic Church.

In light of its careful transition from quietism to political activism, and its dramatic shift from siding with the Muslim Brotherhood to supporting the Sisi government -- as both the region and the country face security challenges from Islamic groups -- al-Nour's current gestures positioning itself as a partner in fighting terrorism and maintaining domestic security could also be understood in practical terms: as attempts to maintain its support base and to distance itself from any government suppression of religious dissent.

Jacob Olidort is an adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East. ❖

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